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## Introduction: The Many Cultures of Walt Whitman, Part One

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## INTRODUCTION: THE MANY CULTURES OF WALT WHITMAN

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IN OCTOBER 1998, Rutgers University-Camden hosted “The Many of Cultures of Walt Whitman,” an international conference celebrating Walt Whitman’s arrival in Camden 125 years ago. The organizers—Rutgers English faculty Tyler Hoffman, Geoffrey Sill, and Carol Singley; Richard Waldron of the New Jersey Historical Society; and faculty in the New Jersey Academic Alliance—designed the conference as a forum to discuss ways that Whitman’s life and work have engaged cultural issues in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The conference, which was funded by Rutgers University, the New Jersey Council on the Humanities, and others, attracted over 250 scholars, teachers, and admirers of Whitman for three days of stimulating conversation. A selection of essays drawn from that lively exchange will comprise two double issues of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, this issue and the one to follow.

The conference proved faithful to the sense of diversity implied by its title. Participants heard over sixty scholarly papers on topics that ranged from Whitman’s newspaper style to his aging body. They attended a keynote address by David Reynolds and presentations by featured speakers Ed Folsom, Jay Grossman, Jerome Loving, Vivian Pollak, and Kenneth Price. They also enjoyed a poetry reading by Galway Kinnell, tours of the newly renovated Whitman House, musical performances of Whitman’s poetry, a theatrical impersonation by Will Stutts, photographs of Whitman and Camden, and exhibits by artists inspired by Whitman. “The Many Cultures of Walt Whitman” demonstrated the wide range of cultural interests to which Whitman’s work is related.

In his keynote address, David Reynolds succinctly outlined the historical and theoretical basis of the conference. Reynolds noted that Whitman’s poetic vision emerged when he was “startled” out of complacency in the early 1850s by what he saw as the disintegration of American life. Under the overarching pressure of the slavery question, America’s “cultural voices” had become “strident ones of anger and protest.” Casting himself in the role of the poet, who—unlike politicians, legislators, revolutionaries, or reformists—alone could bring cultural unity out of chaos, Whitman sought to forge a “poetic utopia” in which the diverse classes, regions, ethnicities, and faiths that made up

America could live in "diversified harmony." Through his absorptive poetic persona, Whitman sought to dissolve the boundaries between cultural groups and reunite them in a larger national personality. The most fruitful approach to understanding Whitman's life's work, Reynolds argued, is one that comprehends the fractionalism of the "historical moment" out of which Whitman's poetry came, and which appreciates its true end: not to erase the multiplicity of cultural voices in America, but to harmonize and unify them. The goal of the conference, Reynolds rightly observed, was to challenge "piecemeal" approaches to Whitman's poems by emphasizing the degree to which Whitman, "more than any other poet except perhaps Shakespeare," is multilayered and multivoiced. The keynote address, not included in this collection, is available as the introductory essay to a forthcoming volume edited by David Reynolds, *Whitman in His Time: A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

The fourteen essays selected for these two double issues of *WWQR* represent a cross-section of the conference. They present a few of the many connections that may be made between the cultures that produced Walt Whitman and those that he affected through his works. The first essays examine urban, artistic, and journalistic elements of culture that are presumed to have contributed to shaping Whitman's sense of himself and his poetic persona. A second cluster of essays discusses religious forces at work in the first half of the nineteenth century, of which remnants may be found in his poetry. A third cluster examines historical events, centered in or following the Civil War, that propelled Whitman to translate the raw material of culture into poetry and prose. A final group of essays examines the effects of Whitman's poetry on contemporary discourses about aging and death, music, philosophy, and television.

In the first essay, "Walt Whitman, the Bachelor, and Sexual Politics," Matt Cohen speculates on Whitman's reasons for giving up the pose of the "bachelor," a word which, in its eighteenth-century sense of the unattached observer of life around him, would seem perfectly suited to the poetic persona of a writer who sought to be both "in and out of the game." By mid-nineteenth century, however, changing connotations of the word "bachelor" may have caused Whitman to avoid using the term to describe his poetic persona.

Ruth Bohan, who wrote a chapter on Whitman and the visual arts community of Brooklyn in the 1850s for the 1992 collection, *Walt Whitman and the Visual Arts*, returns to that subject in her essay, "Walt Whitman and the Sister Arts." Here she examines the connection of the verbal and visual arts to Whitman's later work, arguing that, by the use of "interart terminology," Whitman "restructured" the relation between the sister arts. Just as Whitman allowed the conventions of painting and the presentation of paintings in galleries to affect his own work, so he

transformed the images that visual artists would create in the twentieth century.

In his essay, "Unrhymed Modernity: New York City, the Popular Newspaper Page, and the Forms of Whitman's Poetry," Simon Parker strengthens the known connections between Whitman's poetry and journalism. In the notebooks of the 1840s and 1850s, he argues, we see an artist not simply borrowing subject matter from editorials and reports, but merging the shape of his poems with newspaper form as well. Whitman mixes poetic fragments as if they were classified advertisements, uses identical line designs for wildly different subjects, and captures the extremes of the mundane and the dramatic within a uniform layout. In the newspaper page, regular yet changing daily, Whitman found a form for his vision of the evolving American city.

As with journalism, Whitman was deeply involved in the religious cultures of his time. It is well known that he regarded *Leaves of Grass* as a new Bible, but critics have been reluctant to emphasize the book's claims to be the basis of a new religion. W. C. Harris argues in his essay, "Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and the Writing of a New American Bible," that Whitman's aims as a poet were analogous to those of other "minister-scholars" in mid-nineteenth century America, such as Alexander Campbell or Matthew Conant, who sought to overcome divisive sectarianism through their revisions and translations of the King James version of the Bible. Controversies over the meaning of Biblical passages on such questions as baptism are embedded in Whitman's poems, and while he did not found a new religion himself, he participated in the re-writing of the Bible.

In "Seeds of Quakerism at the Roots of *Leaves of Grass*," Susan Dean examines Whitman's debt to the culture of Quakerism. Some of the underlying features of Quakerism pervade Whitman's poetry, including the defiance of obligatory deference (or "hat-honor"), the affirmation of affection as the basis of social relations, and the toleration of cultural differences. Some other elements of Quakerism, however, did not translate into Whitman's work, including the communal structure and economic egalitarianism of Quaker life; Whitman was either unaware or skeptical of these elements, and Dean sees their absence as a fault in his democratic thought.

In Michael Sowder's "Walt Whitman, the Apostle" we find yet another view of Whitman's interactions with nineteenth-century religion, this time the antebellum culture of conversion. Demonstrating that Whitman's poetry replicates many of the basic features and tendencies of evangelical Protestant conversion, Sowder pays special attention to "Song of Myself," which he reads as a conversion narrative and sermonic performance designed to transform the reader, to convert him or her into Whitman's own image of a "new American personality." Looking closely at the opening lines of that poem, Sowder invokes

the Hegelian notion that to transform something is also to negate it, a principle that allows him to point up the self-abnegation for which Whitman's poem calls.

A similar conversion narrative may be found in some of the prose memoranda that Whitman wrote during the Civil War, perhaps as notes for a lecture. Neither the subject of the memoranda nor the pattern of Whitman's thoughts on the war has been understood, because previous editors of the notes have scrambled their logical order. By re-ordering them, Paul Benton shows in his essay "Hot Temper, Melted Heart" that Whitman's thought was not a strictly rational process, but much like that of a religious conversion, in which a towering anger at the affront to Democracy represented by the rebellion gives way in the writer's heart to feelings of sympathy and brotherly love, prompted by the sight of a column of Confederate prisoners. Benton argues that Whitman's politics, worked out in the process of writing, proceed from Christian and emotional sources.

These seven essays comprise the first of two double issues devoted to the conference proceedings. We are grateful to Ed Folsom, editor of *WWQR*, and Jessica Renaud, his managing editor, for their generosity in making the pages of *WWQR* available to us and for their editorial assistance. We are also grateful to Deborah Cornatzer for her labors in copyediting and source-checking all of the essays.

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